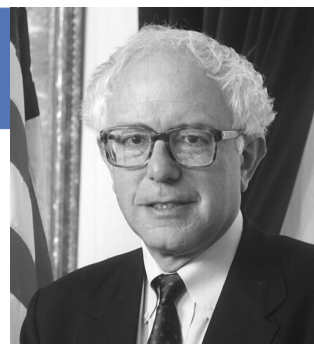




U.S. Representative

Bernie Sanders

A Special Focus on Veterans' Issues



Spring 2004

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Fellow Vermonter,

As we approach Memorial Day I wanted to update you on some of the important issues facing veterans and their families in Washington. While millions of Americans will be gathering with friends and neighbors during the Memorial Day holiday, we shouldn't let the cook-outs and other festivities keep us from remembering what a solemn day it really is. Especially now, when America's sons and daughters are in harm's way overseas, we need to make sure that we truly honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for our nation.

For me, part of honoring our fallen heroes means ensuring that the federal government keeps faith with our nation's veterans and their families. Veterans - past, present, and future - have earned the gratitude of the nation. Too often, however, the needs of veterans do not receive the attention or funding that they deserve. That's wrong. Promises were made to veterans, and those promises must be kept.

As many of you know, last year there were very contentious fights in the Congress about funding for veterans health care and other veterans programs. Some of us believed that adequately funding veterans' benefits was more important than providing hundreds of billions in tax breaks for millionaires. In the end, working with veterans' service organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the Vietnam Veterans of America and other groups, those of us pushing for more support for veterans had some success in convincing the Republican leadership in the House and Senate to increase VA funding.

There was also a partial fix for the concurrent receipt issue. Unfortunately, while both the U.S. House and Senate appeared ready to fully repeal the offset between military retirement pay and VA disability benefits last year - a move I supported - the White House strongly opposed our efforts. As a result, a watered-down version of the repeal was approved that will mean some 400,000 disabled veterans will still be affected by the offset between their military pension and their VA disability benefits.

This year I and other pro-veteran members of Congress are working to end another injustice, namely the fact that the Survivor Benefit Plan penalizes aging survivors, mostly widows, of the veterans of our county. Military retirees pay premiums for years and anticipate that upon their death, their spouse will receive 55 percent of their benefit. But when their survivor reaches 62, a Social Security "offset" drops the benefit to a mere 35 percent. This is not what participants were promised and it needs to be fixed now.

Once again this year it looks like there will be a fight in the Congress over funding for veterans health-related programs. The President's budget includes an increase of less than 2 percent for veterans' health care - not enough to maintain current services and nearly \$3 billion less than veterans' organizations agree is needed. His budget also cuts \$294 million in funding for long-term care for America's veterans and \$50 million cut from award-winning VA medical and prosthetic research. I will be working with the veterans' organization in opposition to the President's budget for veterans and for a substantially higher level of funding.

Finally, I wanted to update you about some of the initiatives I have supported to help tomorrow's veterans - the men and women of our armed forces. Details on those initiatives are found inside on page 3. Among the initiatives is a bill I am introducing that would provide emergency financial help for some of the families of National Guard members and Reservists who were called up for active duty. We must always remember that regardless of what one thinks of any Administration's foreign policy, America's sons and daughters serving in the military deserve our support.

In closing, I would like to remind you that my office stands ready to assist you if you have any questions about what veterans' benefits you may be entitled to or if you are having difficulties with the VA or any federal agency. Sam Haskins, Jim Rader and my other staff members have helped hundreds of Vermont veterans and are prepared to help you as well. I encourage you to give my office a call at 1-800-339-9834. Also, please visit my frequently updated website at bernie.house.gov for the latest on what's going on in Washington.

Sincerely yours,

Bernard Sanders
U.S. Congressman

Keeping Faith with Survivors of Military Retirees

The federal military Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) serves as an important safety net for the survivors of service members entitled to a military pension. However, when most survivors, generally the widows, reach age 62, their benefit falls from 55% of SBP-covered retired pay to merely 35%. This is due to an offset against Social Security benefits. What makes the situation worse is that many SBP-enrollees were never told that this reduction would occur.

This situation is made even more unfair because survivors of federal employees in the civilian Survivor Benefit Plan receive 50% of the Federal Employee Retirement System retirement benefit (55% if they are under the old Civil Re-

tirement System) with no off-set at all when they turn 62. The irony of this is that the survivors of two Pentagon employees – one uniformed and one civilian – will be treated differently. This makes absolutely no sense.

To fix this problem, I have co-sponsored legislation, H.R. 548, which was introduced by Rep. Miller of Arizona and which would restore the military SBP benefit to 55% over a ten-year pe-

riod. Even though over 290 members of the U.S. House have signed on to support H.R. 548, the House Republican budget contains no funding to fix this problem. Therefore, I have joined an effort to secure a vote on H.R. 548 using a parliamentary maneuver known as a discharge petition. If one-half of the members of the U.S. House sign the petition, House leaders are forced to bring the bill up for a vote under the rules of the House. It was this same tactic that brought about the compromise solution on the issue of concurrent receipt last year. As this point, over 200 House members have signed the SBP discharge petition. That means fewer than 20 more members need to sign in order to force the House Leadership to allow a vote on the bill.



Congressman Sanders and his veterans specialist (Sam Haskins, on left) meet with Vermont leaders of the DAV, the Vietnam Veterans of America, the American Legion, and the VFW about the need for increased federal funding for veterans' programs.

Another Year – Same Fight for VA Health Care

Last year we saw some of the most contentious debates about funding for veterans health care in recent memory. At the end of the day, we succeeded in getting \$1.3 billion of the \$1.8 billion we were fighting for. Unfortunately, it looks like the fight for adequate veterans health care funding will be even more heated than last year's. The President has proposed only a 2% increase for veterans health care. That would leave the VA with almost \$3 billion less than it needs, according to the Independent Budget. The Independent Budget is put together by some of the nation's major veterans organizations, including the Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Paralyzed Veterans of America and AMVETS. Even more troubling is that the Administration's budget actually calls for cuts in the VA budget after 2005.

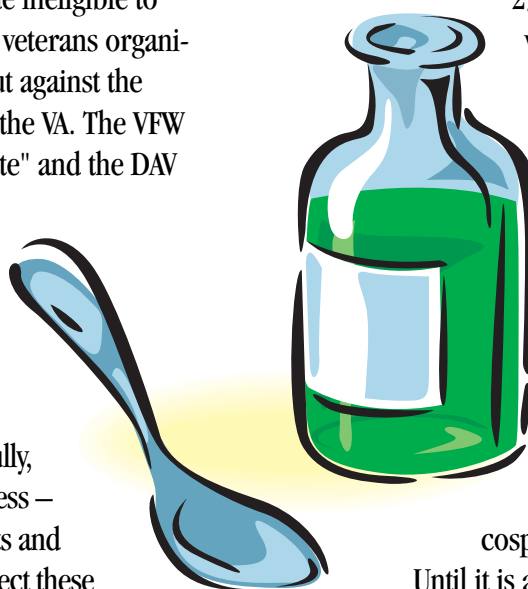
In addition, the White House is proposing copayments and enrollment fees for veterans that equal about \$2 billion

over the next five years. The Administration's own estimates are that these fees, if approved by Congress, would drive 200,000 veterans out of the system and discourage another million from enrolling at all. This is on top of the over 160,000 category 8 veterans who the President made ineligible to enroll in the VA. Major veterans organizations have spoken out against the President's Budget for the VA. The VFW has called it "inadequate" and the DAV said it "has broken faith with the nation's sick and disabled veterans . . ." and the American Legion has pledged to fight for more funding. Thankfully, I believe that the Congress – Republicans, Democrats and Independents – will reject these fees as they have every other time the President has proposed increasing the cost of health care for veterans.

This year's proposed underfunding of VA health care shows once again why we need to change the rules in Washington so that veterans don't have to fight every single year for the health funding they deserve. Rep. Lane Evans (D-IL), himself a Vietnam veteran, has introduced H.R.

2318 which would set up a formula to fund the VA health system automatically each year based on the number of veterans participating, and I am proud to be cosponsoring it.

Until it is approved, I will continue to help lead the effort to adequately fund VA health care.



Helping Service Members and Their Families

The conflicts in the Middle East have meant longer and more frequent deployments for many National Guard members and Reservists - including those from Vermont. In many instances, this has put serious financial strain on their families. Many National Guard and Reservist families throughout the country are now being forced to live on substantially less income than they had anticipated. On occasion, this has led to financial crises. To help these families, I am introducing legislation that would make up to \$500 million available to Guard and Reserve families who face increased or unexpected expenses as a result of a mobilization.

Our service members are facing tremendous danger and stress in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. They should not also have to worry whether their family members back home are surviving financially, or whether there is money available to fix the furnace or get their kids to the dentist. This legislation would allocate money to National Guard and Reservist units for families who face emergency financial situations.

There are a number of important pieces of legislation benefiting veterans, service members and their families that I am supporting. They include:

- H.R. 3615 – Reimburse service members and their families who were forced to buy their own body armor;
- H. Res. 103 – Establish a Select Committee in the U.S. House on POW/MIA Affairs;
- H. Con Res. 103 – Commend the members of the armed forces serving in Iraq and in the war against terrorism, and their families;
- H.R. 303 – End the offset between military retiree pay and VA disability benefits;
- H.R. 1345 – Make up lost income of National Guard members and Reservists who are activated;
- H.R. 1713 – Improve Montgomery GI Bill benefits;
- H.R. 58 – Allow military retirees to participate in the Federal Employee Health Benefits program;
- H.R. 1257 – Permanently allow qualifying National Guard members and Reservists access to VA home loans;
- H.R. 2197 – Require the Pentagon to pay bonuses to service members whose retirement or separation is suspended due to a stop-loss order;
- H.R. 1919 – Allow veterans with a service-connected disability rated 50% or more to fly on military aircraft on a space-available basis.

Contact Information for Veterans

State Veterans Affairs Office Montpelier	828-3379	Dept. of Veterans Affairs	
Vermont Veterans Home Bennington	442-6353	Acquisition Resources	
VA Regional Office (<i>Benefits and Assistance</i>)		Service (<i>businesses</i>)	202-273-8815
White River Jct.	296-5177	Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business	
Toll-free	800-827-1000	Utilization	202-565-8124
Medical Center	White River Jct.	Director for Records Management Service	
VA Outreach Clinic	White River Jct.	(<i>Freedom of Information Act Requests</i>)	202-273-5385
VA Outpatient Clinics	Colchester	To report waste or abuse in the VA:	
	Bennington	Inspector General's Hotline.	800-488-8244
	Rutland		
	St. Johnsbury	Annual Report - write to the Analysis and Reports Service;	
	South Burlington	810 Vermont Avenue, NW; Washington, D.C. 20420	
	White River Junction		
	Toll-free		

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*If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter, we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend.
This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense.*

Visit the New National World War II Memorial

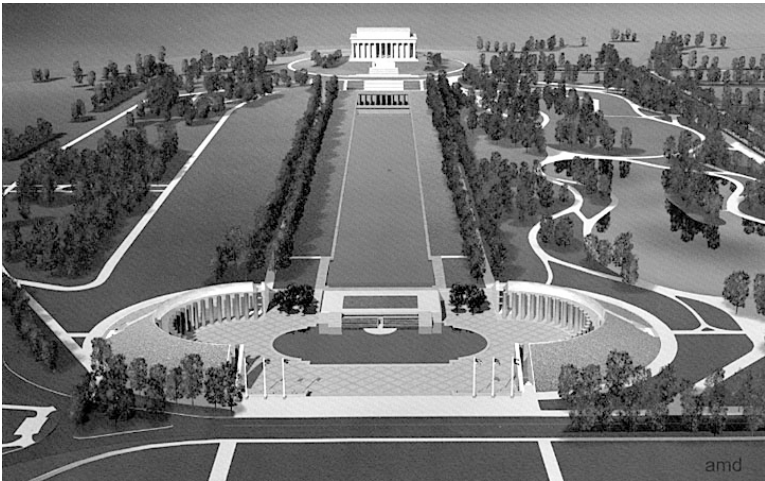
On May 29th, the National World War II Memorial will be formally dedicated. This impressive tribute to the men and women who saved the world from the evil of fascism will serve as a permanent reminder to the nation of their courage and sacrifice for the United States and the world. You can get more information about the memorial by contacting my office.

In conjunction with the World War II Memorial is an electronic registry that can be viewed at the Memorial or on the Memorial's website.

This Registry will contain listings of Americans who contributed to the war effort. Any U.S. citizen – whether a veteran or a civilian on the home front – who helped win the war is eligible for

the Registry. There is no charge to have a name added to the Registry. To add a member of the World War II generation to the Registry, call toll-free 1-800-639-4992 to have a registration form mailed to you.

The dedication of the National World War II Memorial is part of a summer-long series of events in the nation's capital honoring America's Greatest Generation. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, there are over 90 World War II-themed events. For a list of events please contact my office.



Participate in the Veterans History Project

In October 2000, Congress created the Veterans History Project to honor our nation's war veterans and to collect a record of their experiences as told through their own words. This ambitious project is being carried out by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The Project covers all participants – men and women, military and civilian -- in World War I, World War II, and the Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf and Iraq wars. The focus of the project is to collect and preserve audio- and video-taped interviews

with eligible participants, as well as related documents, including letters, diaries, maps, photographs and home movies. In order to be successful, the Veterans History Project needs the participation of people across the country. For more information on how to record and submit an audio- or video-taped interview or statement, please contact my office or the Library of Congress to request a Veterans History Project Information Kit.

Their address is Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 101 Independence

Ave, SE, Washington, DC 20540-4615. Their telephone number is (202) 707-4916 and their email is vohp@loc.gov.

Because of mail screening delays, your request will be processed much, much faster if you contact the Library of Congress via telephone or email. Also, you can find more information on the Veterans History Project on the official website: www.loc.gov/folklife/vets. Again, my office would be pleased to help you participate in the Veterans History Project.